

The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937

Aisha Wahid

Jamieson School, Chicago

Teachers: Robert Newton and Jacobeth Turlow

The Great Depression of the 1930s affected Americans severely. Many workers were laid off and had their wages slashed. In 1933 the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was passed, devised to help industry, labor, and the unemployed. It has been called the "Magna Carta of Labor." The National Recovery Act gave laborers the authority to unionize and negotiate collectively through representatives they chose. In 1935, the NIRA was declared unconstitutional because strikes across the country had become common. Since Congress was still sympathetic to the newly developed labor unions, the Wagner Act was passed to maintain the rights of the workers.

Despite the many hardships faced by the steel industry, there were still revisions to come. In November 1935 the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) was established. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) strongly opposed the principles of the CIO. The AFL believed that workers should join individual unions and then bargain with management separately. On the contrary, the CIO urged all laborers to unite into a single union. Since steelworkers had experienced complications under the AFL, they were ready to try a new approach. Steelworkers became one of the first worker groups to begin unionizing under the Wagner Act, after being encouraged by the CIO.

The Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC) was founded on June 17, 1936. Companies were satisfied with individual alliances between separate unions that existed under the AFL. After lengthy strife for further recognition within the steel industry, "Big Steel," the

United States Steel Corporation endorsed the SWOC. The contract permitted five-dollar wages per day in addition to a forty-hour week of labor. By May 1937, 110 firms had approved contracts, but particular companies refused to cooperate. In response, SWOC called its first strike involving 25,000 workmen against the Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation. The union won after a labor board election.

Despite the tremendous victory, some of the "Little Steel" companies including Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, Inland Steel, and Youngstown Sheet & Tube, refused to approve the contract with SWOC. Tom Girdler, chairman of the Board of Republic Steel, was an exceptionally prominent anti-union spokesperson among the many company leaders.

On May 26, 1937, SWOC decided to strike three of the "Little Steel" companies, Republic, Youngstown Sheet & Tube, and Inland. Nearly all of the plants refrained from production during the strike, but Republic Steel resisted and refused to close all of its plants. It even housed nonunion employees in the plant so production could proceed without the disturbance of picket lines outside. The Republic Steel South Chicago Plant was one of these plants, from which half the employees had joined the strike.

On May 26, when demonstrations began, police tried to prevent workers from joining the cause. Police Captain James Mooney broke up the line and arrested 23 people who refused to move. The rest were forced two blocks away from the plant, to 117th Street. Due to this conduct, the police no longer played an impartial part in the strike, but were evidently supportive of Republic Steel.

The strike headquarters were set up at Sam's Place, a former dance hall at 113th and Green Bay Avenue. Chicago mayor, Edward J. Kelley, acknowledged peaceful picketing in the *Chicago Tribune*.

The next day another attempt was made to picket. Protestors marched from Sam's Place to 117th Street and continued west towards Burley Avenue. When they reached Buffalo, a great mass of police officers awaited. The marchers continued forward and fighting broke out. The police clubbed the strikers and a few drew revolvers without orders. They discharged them into air to keep the demonstrators forewarned of their ability. No one had been killed as the day ended, but there were several bloody heads. May 28 was a quiet day, but the picketers were upset with the police conduct.

Nick Fontecchio, a union leader, called a mass meeting at Sam's Place the next day, Memorial Day Sunday. An anonymous report was sent to Captain Mooney stating that on Sunday an attempt would be made to raid the plant and drive out the remaining non-union workers. Without checking the rumor, Mooney stationed 264 police officers at the Republic Steel Mill.

It was a very frightening day for the thousands that had gathered for the mass demonstration, not knowing what the police were going to do. "Somehow the event, the holiday, the sunshine, and the warm weather made the festive air persist," according to one account. The demonstrators started marching and later decided to change position before going down Green Bay Avenue. The marchers met the police line and demanded that their rights to picket be recognized. The police refused, but the picketers persisted for several minutes, while arming themselves with rocks and branches.

Police blocked the strikers and some began to retreat. Then a stick flew from the back of the line towards the police. Instantaneously, tear gas bombs were thrown at the marchers and other objects were thrown back at the police. Without orders, several policemen drew their revolvers and fired at some picketers. "Get off the field, or I'll put a bullet in your back!" one demonstrator, Mollie West recalls. Using their clubs, the police beat anyone in their path,

including women and children. Four marchers were killed, six later died in the hospital, and thirty others suffered gunshot wounds. There were minor police casualties with thirty-five reported injuries.

In 1942, under legal pressure, the "Little Steel" companies signed their first contracts with the new United Steelworkers of America. The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937 is known as the blackest day in history, but it helped the steelworkers accomplish a lot for themselves and future laborers.

[From Howard Fast, "Memorial Day Massacre," <http://www.trussel.com/hf/memorial.htm> (Nov. 7, 2002); "Memorial Day Massacre," <http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/memorial.htm> (Nov. 7, 2002); student historian's interview with Linh Orear, Oct. 24, 2002; "The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937," http://www.uhigh.ilstu.edu/soc/labor/memorial_day_massacre.htm (Nov. 7, 2002); Illinois Labor History Society, "The Memorial Day Massacre of 1937," 1975 (Filmstrip); student historian's interview with Mollie West, Oct. 24, 2002.]